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AUTHOR Enger, John M.; Vaupel, Carl F., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

An inservice program on dropout prevention was initiated in two middle schools in an Arkansas school district. A four-member consultant team was employed to direct 76 participants (middle school teachers, counselors, and administrators) through a series of four group sessions. The 76 participants were divided into four groups organized to include members from both middle schools in each group. The sessions covered dropout characteristics, classroom management, interpersonal communication, and measurement of dropout characteristics. At the completion of the inservice sessions, participants were asked to complete an anonymous evaluation questionnaire. The results indicated the sessions were very well received regarding clarity of objectives, material presented, organization, instructional processes, and the applicability to the classroom situation. Consultant recommendations for an effective dropout prevention program include administrative commitment, an examination of local dropout characteristics, establishment of a school district communication system, establishment of alternatives to better meet individual instructional needs, and monitoring of extracurricular activities. (Author/MLF)

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A DROPOUT PREVENTION IN-SERVICE PROGRAM FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL FACULTY

John M. Enger

Carl F. Vaupel, Jr.

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Department of Educational Administration

and Secondary Education

Arkansas State University

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A DROPOUT PREVENTION IN-SERVICE PROGRAM

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL FACULTY

Funded through a grant from the Arkansas Crime Commission, an in-service program on dropout prevention was initiated in two middle schools in an Arkansas school district. A four-member consultant team was employed to direct 76 participants (middle school teachers, counselors and administrators) through a series of four group sessions.

The 76 participants were divided into four groups, organized to include members from both middle schools in each group. Each of the four members of the consulting team directed presentations arranged in a specific sequence to each of the four groups as shown in Table I.

In-Service Presentations

The in-service session content as noted in Table I was related to each consultant's training and academic specialty. A brief description of the text of the four presentations follows.

Session One: Dropout Characteristics

A survey of the dropout literature was discussed with special emphasis on early identification. Identification characteristics were grouped into four categories for discussion purposes. The four areas of school, family, peer association, and psychological tendencies of the dropout were presented. The differences in student profiles of the stay-ins and the dropouts were used as the rationale for identifying dropout traits.

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TABLE I

In-Service Program Schedule

Session	Site One		Site Two	
	Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV
Dropout Characteristics	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Classroom Management	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Interpersonal Communication	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Measurement of Dropout Characteristics	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7

Session Two: Classroom Management

A novel, simulated discipline problem was given to the participants. Possible solutions and various preventive techniques were discussed with special attention focused on application. Additional materials were distributed which related to specific situations where students were more likely to misbehave.

The session included lecture and discussion regarding the need for consistency and fairness in classroom regulations, teacher modeling, and the design and acceptance of student work. A taxonomy of discipline control techniques with possible advantages and disadvantages in their application were described.

Session Three: Interpersonal Communication

The third session of the in-service program was conducted as a mini human relations training activity. The session was organized to provide lecture and activities to give the participants knowledge and experiences in the application of human relations and communication skills.

The session included inventories, small group work, disclosures and responding activities. Participants were encouraged to examine perception of self and others and to apply their understandings in more effectively facilitating student growth. Several examples of human relations and communication programs applied to schools were cited.

Session Four: Measurement of Dropout Characteristics

Names of recent local high school dropouts were introduced to the in-service participants. They were asked to reflect on the background

and activities that may have precipitated this student attrition. Related terminology was then introduced and categorized into attitudes and interest, ability and achievement, and home life.

These factors were further delineated to provide specific characteristics, such that sources of measurement could be identified and various procedures could be implemented. The session concluded with the presentation and discussion of components of a program that has been utilized to identify potential early school leavers.

In-Service Program Evaluation

At the completion of all sixteen in-service sessions, participants were asked to complete an anonymous evaluation questionnaire.

The results indicated the sessions were very well received regarding clarity of objectives, material presented, organization, instructional processes and the applicability to the classroom situation.

Included in the assessment instrument was a request for participant comments and recommendations relative to the student dropout problem. These participant recommendations were incorporated in the consultant recommendations that follow.

Consultant Recommendations

The consultant recommendations were based on a review of the literature, session presentations and interactions with in-service participants, participant recommendations, personal academic experiences and consultant team interaction. Formally, these recommendations were presented by the four-member consultant team to school district teacher, counselor and administrative representatives.

Administrative Commitment

Responsibilities associated with educational administration include the definition of roles, assignment of teacher and counselor duties, maintenance of local policies as well as the identification of and the response to instructional needs. Thus any alterations in school organization, such as a dropout prevention program, must rely on administrative initiative and commitment.

Examination of Local Dropout Characteristics

There are student characteristics that relate to early attrition. The predictive effect of these characteristics vary by locale. Therefore, both students who persist in their education and those who drop out should be compared to identify those traits in which differences occur. The availability of data should also be considered in determining the optimal selection of predictive dropout characteristics. Such an investigation would be preliminary to formulating systematic procedures for record keeping.

School Communication

For faculty to work most effectively with students, it is important that information concerning students be collected and disseminated. To facilitate communication at all levels, between schools and among school service personnel, a communications network should be well defined. A school district communication system includes procedures for information exchange and processes to accommodate interaction.

Procedures. Explicit practices should be stipulated for recording and sharing information of significance to a pupil's development. Criteria for determining information to be recorded and methods for dissemination should be familiar to all faculty and staff members. In a dropout prevention program it is essential that these procedures communicate student traits and activities that reflect specific dropout trends.

The addition of elementary counselors to this school district would greatly enhance the implementation of the inter-school communications network. Procedures to extend communication externally include a parental newsletter and increased local media coverage.

Processes. To accommodate better faculty and staff communications a forum should be established to facilitate teacher interaction. Teacher and staff conference periods could be placed in the schedule for regular monitoring of pupil activities. In-service activities such as the dropout prevention program aid the communication process. Faculty-staff interest coupled with instructional needs should dictate the format of in-service activities, such as the inter-personal effectiveness training being undertaken by this school district.

School Curricula

Schooling which differs from traditional education in subject matter, specific student populations or program organization is classified as alternative education. To supplement the traditional school program two alternatives have been implemented in this school district to better meet individual instructional needs. One program, the Alternative School, seeks to offer educational opportunities to students having difficulty conforming

to the more traditicnal school routine. Successful administration and operation of this program will encourage school attendance by students identified as potential dropouts.

Another program, the area vocational-technical school, also meets individual student needs. Currently, only juniors and seniors are admitted into the program; sophomores are the only class for which visitation sessions are provided. To influence some younger students to persist in school, the vocational technical program should be introduced prior to the sophomore year. Thus, visitation sessions extended to ninth grade students, middle school students and those in the upper elementary grades is recommended. Infusing career awareness activities into the curriculum would make the vocational education visitation sessions more meaningful.

To develop more interest in school affairs, more students should be encouraged to participate in a variety of special interest areas. The extent of participation by all students should be monitored and reported to document the overall effect of the extra-curricular program.

Implications

Although this dropout prevention in-service program and consequent consultant recommendations were developed for an Arkansas school district, the process and procedures may be applicable to other school situations. This in-service program utilized outside expertise to research the topic and present the material. This use culminated in an interactive session among all parties involved (consultants, administrators, teachers and counselors) to relate specifically to the local dropout sit ation. This structured scheme would be applicable to other in-service content areas as

evidenced by the positive responses noted informally and through the evaluation questionnaire.

The recommendations pertaining to the middle school dropout situation in this school district are not unique. Thus, these recommendations may be viewed in the extent to which they relate to existing programs in other school districts. A local school district might assess its program components concerning the dropout problem with respect to the recommendations offered, such as administrative commitment, local dropout data, the communications network effectiveness, alternative instructional programs and monitoring of extra-curricular activities.

FOOTNOTE

1. Dr. Edmund Barnette, Professor of Counselor Education, and Dr. Joseph P. Sweat, Professor of Educational Administration and Secondary Education at Arkansas State University, were members of the dropout prevention in-service program consultant team.